

Individualism in the early modern period

Philosophy



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“ Individualism and the Early Modern Period” For much of the world, the Early Modern period (from about 1500-1700) was a revolutionary time, marked by political, scientific and literary transitions. Politically, nations began to resist outside rule and establish their own national languages. Scientifically, the idea of a heliocentric universe (rather than a geocentric one) began to gain favor as Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus challenged tradition and church doctrine. In Europe, the invention of printing brought about a literary explosion.

Books and texts could be mass-produced, making them much more affordable. Suddenly, one did not have to be of a certain socioeconomic status to have access to books. Writers saw the incredible potential of printing and ran with it, incorporating newly-available vernacular languages into their writing. The printing press opened up a world of seemingly endless possibility. The Early Modern period was marked by a resistance to (and sometimes rejection of) the status quo. Traditions were challenged, questioned, and sometimes abandoned.

It was this heady atmosphere that gave rise to individualism. Individualism The American Heritage Dictionary defines individualism as “ a social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual. ” The Early Modern period represents a shift in emphasis from the group dynamic (most notably the church) to the worth of the individual person. The thoughts, desires, goals and value of the individual gained significantly in importance, and one of the areas in which this shift is most readily apparent is in the world of literature.

Niccolo Machiavelli was not necessarily revered as a writer during his lifetime, but from a literary standpoint, he was definitely a man of his time, and he illustrates this in his 1513 work, *The Prince*. Machiavelli and *The Prince* Machiavelli grew up during the peaceful Italian Renaissance, as Florence was becoming one of the leading cities in the areas of art and philosophy rather than placing an emphasis on military might and political savvy. Consequently, when King Charles VIII of France invaded Italy, the Florentines offered little resistance.

Machiavelli, who became an employee of the Florentine Republic in 1498, helped his fellow citizens form a militia to avoid a similar defeat. It didn't help; Spain invaded in 1512, and the Florentines again failed to offer much resistance. Machiavelli began writing his book, *The Prince*, the year after the Spanish invasion. The book, which is still reviled in some circles, is a treatment of the use of power to create, control, and protect a principality. It illustrates Machiavelli's belief that Florence needed a strong ruler to avoid any more humiliating defeats.

The Prince and Individualism The author's approach to individualism is quite straightforward. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes of the need for a ruler who is unafraid to use his power to advance his own causes. The ruler, according to Machiavelli, was to be cruel when necessary, deceitful when warranted, and willing to use terror to keep people in line (including his own). The author uses historical examples to illustrate his belief that a ruler establishes his strength by first establishing ironclad control over his own people -- by force, if necessary. Had Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus been unarmed," he writes, " they would not have had their institutions respected by the

people for very long. " (Machiavelli, p. 1505) Machiavelli's view on individualism is hard and fast; the individual - that is, the prince - comes first, above all others. Machiavelli also uses tone to great effect in *The Prince*. The author did not seem to consider his book to be a piece of literature. Rather, he intended for it to be a how-to guide for an effective ruler.

His formal tone is apparent right away in his opening "Dedicatory Letter," in which he states his qualifications for writing such a treatise (Machiavelli knew Pope Alexander VI, King Louis XII, and Girolamo Savonarola among others, and considered himself eminently qualified to speak to the proper uses of power): "I have not found among my possessions anything I cherish more or value so much as my knowledge of the accomplishments of great men, which I learned through long experience in contemporary affairs and continuous study of antiquity. (p. 1503) Here, too, does Machiavelli's approach to individualism show through; he is telling the new prince that his thoughts and ideas matter, and that they should be taken seriously if not heeded outright. Machiavelli vs. Other Early Individualist Authors Although Machiavelli probably would not be considered on the same literary plane as William Shakespeare or Petrarch, it is instructive to compare their differing approaches to individualism.

Shakespeare, though known primarily as a playwright, was also the author of more than 150 sonnets. In them, Shakespeare approaches individualism in a much different way than Machiavelli, focusing on the importance of emotion. His "Sonnets" focuses on love, sexual desire, and finally, heartbreak. Petrarch's "Canzoniere" also places emphasis on the feelings of the

individual. "Canzoniere" is a love poem in which the narrator sings praises of the love of his life, Laura, lamenting her death, and holds out hope for a reunion after he himself passes away. Machiavelli's view on individualism is starkly different from Shakespeare, Petrarch, and other individualistic authors of his day, but in its own way, it is just as representative of the times. What can *The Prince* offer us?

While few current world leaders would want to be referred to as Machiavellian (a term now used to describe ruthless, unscrupulous behavior), many leaders have followed some of the teachings of *The Prince*, whether knowingly or not. Even our own leaders seem to heed Machiavelli's advice on promise keeping – the idea that it is acceptable to break a promise if keeping it places one at a disadvantage. Nearly five hundred years after *The Prince* was published, its approach to individualism still resonates today.